

Top Ten Tips for Student Teaching in Kindergarten

Beverly A. McKenna: Georgia Southern University

Beverly A. Strauser: Georgia Southern University

Kindergarten student teachers face a unique set of challenges as they strive to meet the needs of very young children. This article presents ten suggestions for ensuring a successful experience. They are based on the authors' many years of experience in working with student teachers placed in kindergarten settings. Arranged in Letterman fashion in ascending order of importance from the 10th to the 1st tip, they provide teacher educators with practical advice to share with their students prior to placement.

Regardless of how much support a teacher education program might provide, student teaching represents a clear break from the relative security of college classrooms. Like a fledgling pushed suddenly out of the nest, the student teacher must find ways just to survive, let alone flourish. Unless the right things begin to happen quickly, the fall from the nest can result in a very hard landing indeed. The purpose of this article is to offer suggestions for ensuring a softer landing and a more successful student teaching experience.

Because kindergarten presents contexts and concerns that differ markedly from those of the upper grades, it makes sense to focus on these differences. Kindergartners have only just begun their transition from simple to critical reasoning, sometimes called the “five-to-seven shift” (Smolkin & Donovan, 2002; White, 1965). Despite preschool experiences, kindergartners may be inexperienced at working in groups and may find it hard to exercise the self-discipline required in school settings. The simplest routines may need to be explicitly taught. Kindergartners often exhibit limited oral language development

and may lack the basic academic vocabulary a student teacher might expect them know. (For example, they might be unfamiliar with words like directions, folder, marker, and line up). A few kindergartners may still struggle for independence in physical functions, such as using the toilet, operating zippers, and tying shoes.

For all of these reasons, a kindergarten placement may confront a student teacher with unique challenges. The following tips may be helpful in meeting these challenges. They are arranged, in the style of David Letterman, in order of increasing importance.

Tip No. 10

Locate web resources before you begin to student teach. There are several types of sites that can make your life easier. Some, like starfall.com, offer lesson plans and activities. Others can put you in touch with teachers across the country that are willing to share ideas and answer questions. A site designed specifically for kindergarten teachers is the Kindergarten listserv (<http://www.egroups.com/group/kinderkorner>), which allows

you to join an email discussion group at no cost. It is also a good idea to research your school before you arrive. Remember that your classroom does not operate in a vacuum but has a school context that you need to understand. Nearly all schools have websites, and you should definitely take the time to explore yours. In addition, the state department of education houses “report cards” that offer demographics and achievement histories.

Tip No. 9

Try to connect with parents. After all, you will be serving their children and they have a right to know who you are. They might also provide useful information or be in a position to follow-up with their children on suggestions you might offer. Ask your cooperating teacher for permission to send a letter of introduction, and to make phone calls to share how each child is doing. Try to attend parent visits, and learn as much as you can about them.

Tip No. 8

Review assessment data for each child. These include more than formal measures, such as test scores. Examine daily work, review portfolios if the teacher compiles them, and find out which children are receiving interventions. Talk to children about what they are learning and what interests them. Take advantage of brief opportunities throughout the school day to get to know each child. Ask questions and (later) make notes about what they tell you and what they observe.

Tip No. 7

Be mindful of attention spans. Do not plan activities that last longer than 15 or 20 minutes. Use every-pupil-response techniques to ensure engagement, to keep young minds from wandering, and to help you monitor their understanding. For example, rather than choosing

one child to answer a question, devise ways for all children to respond at once. One approach would be to say, “Put your hand on your chest and make a fist. In a minute I will say something about our story. When I say ‘go,’ show me one finger if you agree with what I say and two fingers if you do not agree.”

Tip No. 6

Be ready to help build fine motor skills. Children at this age are not yet automatic in many of the everyday operations that adults take for granted. Be observant as they hold pencils and crayons, open juice boxes and baggies, open and close doors, tie shoes, and turn on faucets. When you notice a problem, turn the help you provide into a teachable moment as you model and explain. In so doing, however, avoid the mistake of taking over and performing the task for the child. Aim to be a temporary scaffold, not a permanent support.

Tip No. 5

Acquaint yourself with developmentally appropriate practice. Kindergartners are making their way past developmental milestones in various areas and at different rates. No two children are alike, of course, but it helps to gain a frame of reference for what to expect. One place to start is by reviewing a child development text. Online sources can be helpful as well, such as pbs.org, which lists kindergarten milestones in reading and talking. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (naeyc.org) publishes standards for developmentally appropriate instruction (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), as well as online resources for teachers.

Tip No. 4

Understand your curriculum. Spend some quality time reading the materials your school has adopted. You will be expected to use these materials in your instruction, and the more

familiar you become with the procedures, strategies, and activities, the better your instruction will be. But make no mistake—studying the teacher’s editions of commercial programs is anything but light reading. It requires extended time spent not merely reading but visualizing how the components of a program fit together, how activities might unfold, and how they might be implemented in a particular classroom space. As you begin your student teaching placement (or beforehand if possible), borrow the TEs, take them home, and curl up with them.

Tip No. 3

Teach social skills. Most of the activities in which kindergartners engage occur in social situations. This means children will be required to interact, and they must do so with courtesy and respect. These qualities do not come naturally, and in too many cases they are not modeled at home. Help your teacher create a respectful climate by communicating an expectation to be polite, to say “please” and “thank you,” to take turns, to listen while others speak, and to share. Posting a list of these expectations and making it part of the Morning Message can help establish a yearlong environment of courtesy and respect.

Tip No. 2

Pay attention to routines. Kindergartners without preschool experience are confronted for the first time with the necessity of working in small groups and with partners, of following complex directions, and of learning classroom procedures. Research indicates that the most effective teachers take the time needed to explicitly teach routines so that instruction is efficient and time is not lost during transitions (e.g., Brophy, 1986). The classroom teacher with whom you are placed will have begun this process. Make sure you understand the procedures children have been taught. Talk with the classroom teacher about specific expectations

and then look for opportunities to reinforce them as the school day proceeds.

Tip No. 1

Think safety at all times. Kindergartners are always in motion, always exploring their environment. At the same time, their limited knowledge of the world has not yet equipped them with a healthy caution when engaging in potentially dangerous activities like climbing stairs, using scissors, running across a playground, or playing near a bus. At the risk of being a scold, you must learn to anticipate harm and take action to prevent it. You will not always succeed, as accidents are bound to happen, but you can reduce the chances of serious injury by learning and enforcing classroom rules.

We in no way wish to suggest that these tips are all you need to be successful in a kindergarten student teaching placement. You will need all of your preparation for that to happen. However, we believe that it is to your advantage to begin your placement with a game plan, one that will help you organize your time and give you a focus. These tips, collected from research and experience, should be a part of that plan. As a fledgling teacher pushed out of the nest, you may find that these tips can make your landing softer.

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Author's Note

Beverly A. McKenna is Assistant Professor
of Elementary Education at Georgia Southern
University, where her duties include supervising
student teachers. Previously, she taught
kindergarten and third grade for 15 years.

Beverly A. Strauser is an instructor in the
Department of Teaching and Learning at Georgia
Southern University, where she supervises student
teachers. She was an elementary teacher for 10
years.